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Intelligibility of Different English Varieties of Students at Fu Jen Catholic University

### **Abstract**

As more people around the world uses English to communicate with others, intelligibility of different varieties of English becomes vital. However, there are many factors that could influence listeners' intelligibility, such as familiarity with certain English varieties and English proficiency of the listeners. Most English education in Expanding Circle countries emphasizes Inner Circle models and uses them as the standard for teaching English. Tertiary schools in Taiwan, for example, teaches primarily in American English. This may prevent students from being able to understand other English varieties. This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

### **Key Words**

Intelligibility; Kachru's three concentric circles of English; Accent familiarity; English proficiency

### **Outline**

#### I. Introduction

- A. English can be distinguished as three concentric circles according to linguist Braj Kachru proposes: the Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. (Kirpatrick 28).

- B. Intelligibility of different English varieties becomes a problem due to the increasing number of English speakers from around the world.
- C. Thesis Statement: This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Familiarity

- i. “Research in speech perception and processing has shown that prior exposure to foreign-accented speech leads to faster processing speeds” due to listeners’ development in perceptual adaptation to foreign-accented speech (Huang 771, 776).
- ii. Studies also show “a trend toward a positive relationship between intelligibility and duration of overseas experience” (Orikasa 362).

### B. English Proficiency

- i. There is “evidence of an interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for listeners (i.e., native Mandarin listeners were more accurate than native English listeners at identifying Mandarin-accented English words)” (Hayes-Harb et. al. 664).
- ii. “Non-native listeners who are exposed primarily or entirely to English spoken with an accent in their own language perceive their fellows' speech better than that of native English speakers” (Xie and Fowler 376).
- iii. In cases concerning native English speech, “non-native English speakers may experience difficulty in understanding spoken

English, even when they have a good understanding of written English” (Irvine 314).

### III. Research Methodology

- A. Research Questions
- B. Data Collection
- C. Participants’ English Background

### IV. Results and Discussion

- A. Accent Recognition: Results
- B. Accent Recognition: Discussion
- C. Intelligibility: Results
- D. Intelligibility: Discussion
- E. Ranking of Intelligibility

### V. Conclusion

### VI. Works Cited

### VII. Appendix

- A. Language Background Questionnaire
- B. Sound Recording Sources

### VIII. Works Cited



## **Intelligibility of Different English Varieties of Students at Fu Jen Catholic University**

### **I. Introduction**

English has grown to become one of the most influential languages around the world today. As the famous Linguist Braj Kachru proposed, English can be distinguished as three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, which “refers to the traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English”, the Outer Circle, which “represents the institutionalized non-native varieties in the regions that have passed through extended periods of colonization” where English is considered as a second language (ESL), and Expanding Circle, which “includes the regions where the performance varieties of the language are used essentially in EFL [English as a foreign language] contexts” (Kirkpatrick 28). Examples of Inner Circle countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where English language norms are developed. The Outer Circle that is norm-developing consists of countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Last but not least, the Expanding Circle encompasses countries like France, China, and Taiwan, which are norm-dependent and rely heavily on Inner Circle standards.

People all over the world are learning English and speakers in the Inner Circle are largely outnumbered by those in the Outer and Expanding Circles. It is inevitable that there will be more interactions occurring between non-native English speakers (ESL and EFL) than between native English speakers and non-native English speakers. However, as English becomes a global language, there is also development in language variation, in which intelligibility becomes a concern. Intelligibility is the ability to understand words and utterances that are heard. For global communication in English, intelligibility is imminent. However, most English education in Expanding Circle countries emphasizes Inner Circle models and uses them as the standard for teaching English. Tertiary schools in Taiwan, for example, teaches primarily in American English. Even the Test of English for International

Communication (TOEIC) only uses speakers from Inner Circle countries in its listening section. As a result, foreign-accented speech is more likely to become inferior in students' minds, and intelligibility of different varieties of English becomes troublesome. The current English instruction in Fu Jen Catholic University is limited to such standards. This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Familiarity

It is sensible to think that the more contact with a variety of the English language, the more familiar one is with such variety, and thus will be able to recognize the speech more easily. "Research in speech perception and processing has shown that prior exposure to foreign-accented speech leads to faster processing speeds" due to listeners' development in perceptual adaptation to foreign-accented speech (Huang 771, 776). Many studies and experiments have also aligned with such viewpoint. One study in Japan, for example, suggests that "less familiar accent was more difficult for students to comprehend than a more familiar North American English accent" (Matsuura et. al. 143). Just like students in Taiwan, Japanese university students are primarily exposed to Inner Circle English varieties. This makes instruction or assessments comprehension more difficult when students encounter different English varieties in which they are not familiar with.

Familiarity is substantial for listeners as ESL "listeners who have learned a second language later in life happen to naturally form a class of listeners who vary in experience with foreign accents" (Weber et. al. 480). This experience can then be advantageous to students in terms of intelligibility. Studies also show "a trend toward a positive relationship between intelligibility and duration of overseas experience" (Orikasa 362). With these prior











with other English varieties seem to differ in their ability to recognize the different English varieties. Participants' ability to recognize different English varieties indeed have a positive relationship with their English proficiency level and the amount of contact with different varieties of English.

### C. Intelligibility: Results

Table 2

Varieties Interviewees	American English: 4/5	British English: 4/5	Indian English: 3/5	Singaporean English: 0/5	French English: 5/5	Mandarin Chinese English: 5/5
A (B2)					*	*
B (B2)	*	*	*		*	*
C (C1)	*	*			*	*
D (C2)	*	*	*		*	*
E (C2)	*	*	*		*	*

Participants were examined for their ability to understand the voice recording that were played by making a summary of the dialogue. The intelligibility of different varieties of English are listed below. For Inner Circle English, the results were both four out of five varieties which were intelligible. Participant A makes the exception for both American English and British English, most likely due to the insufficiency of English proficiency and contact with different English varieties.

Outer Circle English is the least intelligible based on the five participants. Three participants were able to understand Indian English speech: participant B, D, and E. Their greater contact with other English varieties compared to participant A and C may play a vital role in their intelligibility. Singaporean English was unintelligible to all of the

participants. Possible reason for this could be due to the usage of different dialects of Chinese in Singaporean English dialect. Without the knowledge of vocabulary from other dialects of Chinese, it may be difficult for listener to understand Singaporean English speech.

Once again, participants got the best results with Expanding Circle English. All of the participants were able to understand both French English and Mandarin Chinese speech. It is believed that familiarity with Outer Circle English varieties can increase the intelligibility with such varieties.

#### D. Intelligibility: Discussion

Overall, participants in the C2 English proficiency level generally received better results than participants in the lower English proficiency level, with the exception of participant B. Participant A only found Expanding Circle English intelligible, possibly due to lack of contact with other English varieties. From the above results, English proficiency level and contact with different varieties of English appears to influence participants' intelligibility to a certain extent. Participants' ability to recognize different varieties of English, however, does not seem to influence their ability to understand different varieties of English speech.

#### E. Ranking of Intelligibility

Based on the five participants, the most intelligible English varieties are from the Expanding Circle, suggesting that contact with certain English varieties strongly influences intelligibility of said varieties. The least intelligible English varieties are from the Outer Circle, most likely due to the lack of prior experience and specific vocabulary of such varieties. Inner Circle English varieties are not as intelligible as Expanding Circle English varieties, but are still fairly intelligible. Since most school systems in Taiwan is

based on the American English standards, it is reasonable for participants to be able to understand Inner Circle English better than Outer Circle English.

## V. Conclusion

From the evidence collected in this research, it can be suggested that familiarity is an important factor for intelligibility of different English varieties. In order to allow students at Fu Jen Catholic University to have a better understanding of other English varieties, some suggestions on classroom instruction are provided.

One way to improve students' familiarity is to hire more teachers speaking different English varieties. The more contact students have with other English varieties, the better their intelligibility is. Another way to help students be more familiar with other English varieties is to add more courses that are held as global classrooms. Interacting and conducting discussions with students from different English circles may also increase students' familiarity and further improve their intelligibility. For students particularly not in English department, they should also have more courses with English instruction. Classes like Calculus or Marketing can all be taught in English so students can receive more input on a regular basis.

Some final consideration should be pointed out for further research in the future. First of all, the sample size of this research is insufficient to make a strong claim. The students who participated cannot act solely as the representation of all students in Fu Jen Catholic University. Another problem with the research lies with the audio recordings. It should be noted that the content of the audio recordings should be of related subjects. The difficulty level of the content could affect the outcome of participants' understanding. With the above consideration, the research can then be carried further to investigate other possible causes that may influence listeners' intelligibility.

## VI. Appendix

### A. Language Background Questionnaire

- i. Have you ever lived in any countries other than Taiwan? If so, where and for how long?
- ii. How did you learn English? (i.e., English Cram School, Taiwanese Education System, International/Bilingual School)
- iii. Have you ever taken any English proficiency exams? If so, which ones and what were your scores?

### B. Sound Recording Sources

- American English: 0:02~0:39 (37 seconds)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdiFzcpmmJc>
- British English 2:03-2:26 (23 seconds)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WD010vkGe4>
- Indian English 0:26~0:46 (20 seconds)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9arM\\_agKFA&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9arM_agKFA&feature=youtu.be)
- Singaporean English 0:12~0:44 (32 seconds)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d28yRBX0tgo&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo\\_LRQ-TYS&index=6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d28yRBX0tgo&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS&index=6)
- French English 0:23~0:53 (30 seconds)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bigeWSYMYaM&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo\\_LRQ-TYS&index=4&t=53s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bigeWSYMYaM&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS&index=4&t=53s)
- Mandarin Chinese English 0:35~1:00 (25 seconds)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K94k-2ILMDc&index=9&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo\\_LRQ-TYS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K94k-2ILMDc&index=9&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS)

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